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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined and compared the theoretical basis of a remedial curriculum program designed for beginning readers with the espoused theory of the teacher chosen to lead the program's implementation. Visits to the elementary school (located in a town which adjoins a military base), document reviews, classroom observations, and interviews where the data collection techniques were used. A content analysis was conducted for each data set and then compiled and analyzed as a whole. Results indicated that the teacher's espoused theory ("practical theoretical beliefs") and the curriculum's implied theory (a positivist view of education) did not match. The teacher felt powerless to provide answers to her own important questions about her students and instead relied on the program to tell her what to do and when to do it. Findings suggest that only when preservice teachers are given time for thoughtful reflection and participation in the decision making process will this powerlessness cease. (RS)

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The Power of Powerlessness

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine and compare the theoretical basis of a remedial curriculum program designed for beginning readers with the espoused theory of the teacher chosen to lead this program's implementation. On-site visits, document reviews, classroom observations, and interviews were the data collection techniques used. A content analysis was conducted for each data set and then compiled and analyzed as a whole. It was concluded that the teacher's espoused theory and the curriculum's implied theory did not match. Questions and issues of teacher powerlessness and the teacher's role in curriculum will be discussed.

Introduction

While standards for public schools continue to increase and the demands from the public become more and more intense, educators scamper to find solutions for those students who are at-risk of academic failure (Ebel 1980). Public school administrators and teachers are desperately trying to keep up and responsibly respond to the complicated and sometimes overwhelming needs of these students, while very aware that long-standing practices of retention and tracking are being questioned and even considered by some detrimental to the academic progress of at-risk students (Byrnes and Yamaoto 1986). Traditional alternatives, such as Title I and Special Education programs, are not only suffering from budget cuts, but these programs are also facing severe scrutiny from legislators and the public. The struggle to allow success for all students continues for most public schools. This study explores one school system's effort to ease this struggle through the utilization of a curriculum program.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare the teacher's espoused theory with the curriculum's implied

theory as evidenced through its format and to understand the impact of curriculum program change upon the teacher.

Site and Background

An elementary school with a student enrollment of 450 was chosen as the site for this research. This selection was primarily based upon its much publicized curriculum implementation and its success in becoming the only training site for this curriculum in the state of Alabama. This elementary school is located in a town which joins a military base, and its students are largely military dependents of non-commissioned officers and civil service employees.

This curriculum program is designed to serve the lowest twenty percent of beginning readers. There are not requirements regarding the students' intelligence, race, language achievement (there are recommendations for the use of this program with students whose second language is English), school history, physical handicaps, or learning disabilities. This program is considered a one time intervention with a goal of accelerating students and helping them to develop into independent readers, who are able to read on the

average level in their class, without the need for further help. It requires one-on-one individualized instruction for an average of twelve to sixteen weeks. This program is a supplemental pull-out program, and therefore, it does not replace the reading and writing instruction which is offered in the regular classroom.

Theoretical Framework

The three curriculum theories as identified by Grundy (1987), based upon the work of Habermas, are used as the framework for this research. The technical theory takes on a positivist view of the world. Curriculum is considered a product, the learner is expected to passively receive knowledge, and the focus is upon the subject matter. The teacher guides and dictates the instructional process. Student evaluations are based upon their ability to meet pre-determined objectives.

In the practical theoretical base, the world is viewed as a subject and not an object. Curriculum is flexible and changing based upon the interests, talents and/or needs of the student. Understanding and interaction are considered crucial in the practical theorist's classroom, and the teacher is considered a facilitator expected to interact with the student and

provide an environment which encourages learning. This instruction is student centered, and evaluation focuses upon the student's level of understanding, the student's acquisition of higher-order thinking skills and the student's ability to apply knowledge to "real-life" situations.

Curriculum in the emancipatory theorist classroom would be viewed as a praxis. Grundy (1987) defines praxis as action based upon human good. Thus the curriculum is determined and continually modified as the student acts and reflects. The teacher and the student are partners in learning and curriculum development. Evaluation is based upon the student's level of involvement in the learning process and the student's completion of agreed upon learning tasks

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES AND DESCRIPTIONS

A qualitative approach was used in this research process. Interviews were conducted with the Assistant Superintendent and the teacher chosen to lead this curriculum implementation; observations were conducted of a teacher training session and one instructional session; several video taped instructional sessions

were reviewed; and documents, such as books and articles, along with system developed communications were reviewed. The interview with the teacher was audio taped. This tape was reviewed and its contents compared with collected field notes to identify reoccurring themes. Field notes were also collected during observations which contained descriptions of people, places, events, and conversations, along with ideas, reflections, hunches, and notes about patterns which seem to be emerging.

Data Analysis

All data were reviewed using a content analysis. Data were broken into units of information, developed into master lists, and then grouped by theoretical view. The weight of evidence was used to determine the teacher's theory and the theoretical perspective of the materials and the program.

Assistant Superintendent Information

My interview with the Assistant Superintendent primarily centered upon the process used to implement the curriculum. The school system's Assistant Superintendent, who is also its Title I Director, told me that he became concerned about students who were remaining in the Title I program without "successfully

exiting" the program. He realized, through a review of students' academic records, that those students who did leave the Title I program were often placed in Learning Disabled or Educable Mentally Retarded programs. The Assistant Superintendent spent four years attending conferences, reading the reviews on intervention programs for at-risk students, and visiting other successful Title I programs in an effort to discover a "better way" to offer instruction to Title I or academically at-risk students enrolled in his school system.

He became very interested in this curriculum program, and he began to intensify his review. The Assistant Superintendent, along with the school system's three elementary principals, attended a national conference. After this conference, they visited a school in Georgia where this program had been implemented. The decision to implement this program in the local school system was then made by the Assistant Superintendent and the elementary principals with endorsement from the Superintendent and the Board of Education. While the curriculum program was funded solely through Title I funds, Title I teachers, Title I staff members, nor classroom teachers were participants

in this decision making process. It was decided that there would not be a public announcement or an announcement within the school system that this curriculum would be utilized until a teacher had been appointed to lead this effort.

The Assistant Superintendent would solely decide who would be asked to lead the program. During our interview, he told me that he wanted someone who was "bright" and "willing" to complete the required training. The required training included a commitment to attend school at an out of state university for one year. The Assistant Superintendent decided to ask a sixth grade teacher with twelve years of experience. When he approached her, she agreed.

The Assistant Superintendent relies upon this teacher to conduct the daily activities of the program and to complete all required paper work. He expressed confidence in her abilities and certainty that the curriculum was impacting positively upon at-risk students.

TEACHER INFORMATION

My first visit with the teacher-leader was in her school to conduct the taped interview which was scheduled to begin at 3:15. I entered the school

around 3:00, and students were lining the halls to leave for the day. Teachers stood in their classroom doors, and a chorus of "bye-byes" could be heard from throughout the building. The teachers were professionally attired and offered broad smiles and hugs to what appeared to be every child.

In the teacher's room, a long work table, loaded with materials, consumed the room's floor space. The room was void of the traditional student and teacher desks. Instead several file cabinets and bookshelves, which were very full with what appeared to be professional journals and books, filled the room. The room looked like an adult classroom or an office instead of an elementary classroom. The teacher explained to me that this room was used to train other teachers to utilize this program. At the other end of the room was a observation glass with adult chairs in front, Through the glass, a small classroom was visible with a work table, a portable chalkboard, children's books, and student furniture. It was in this area that students were offered instruction.

The teacher was dressed in a professional navy blue suit. A very firm handshake and a broad smile were offered to me. I thanked her for agreeing to

speak with me, especially after a full workday. She seemed delighted to share.

We began our interview by discussing how she had become involved in this curriculum's implementation. She recounted the events as shared with me by the Assistant Superintendent. She told me that her exposure to this program was limited to readings in professional journals, and that she did not have a commitment or interest in the program when she was approached by the Assistant Superintendent. However, she was very "interested" in becoming trained and leading the curriculum implementation process in her school. During my interview with her, she stated that this interest grew out of her experiences as a sixth grade teacher.

> I knew as a sixth grade teacher that I still didn't (know), as classroom teacher, what to do with students who could not read sixth grade material. I knew I didn't have the time nor the expertise to know how to help children when they were reading on the second grade level when they were in my classroom.

She quickly added, with a smile

> Now we know what to do (when a student is struggling). Now we have something specific to do when students cannot keep up. And it is great to finally know what to do.

During my interview, I asked the teacher to share her perceptions regarding the role of the teacher in the teaching process. She responded that the teacher ''must be a good observer of what the child understands." She continued by saying that the ''teacher should do a lot of modeling'' and ''a lot of reinforcing of positive behaviors (from the student)." She concluded by stating that the teacher should use a broad approach so that ''visual learners have an opportunity to learn and auditory learners have an opportunity to learn." She continued:

> A teacher must look for a child's strengths and build curriculum on those strengths, and not look at what the kids cannot do, but what a child can do.

This teacher stated that she felt the role of a teacher changed when students entered the middle grades (fourth, fifth, and sixth). She believed the teacher was still an "observer" but the observation did not need to be as ''keen." The job of a middle school teacher was to:

> ...help children to learn from the content. Most of the basic skills have been mastered by that time. You don't need that razor sharp look at these kids.

The role of the student was described as an ''active participant in the learning." She concluded by stating that the teacher and the child have ''equal responsibilities" in the learning process. They must "both be engaged." She expressed considerable concern regarding the emotional well-being and consequential behavioral problems of students.

> If we (teachers) could get their (the students) emotions under control and get their behaviors under control, then they could learn.

The home, she stated, has more potential to impact upon a child than the school. Poor behavior was offered as a primary reason that many students did not perform well in the classroom.

The following metaphors were used by the teacher to describe the role and actions of the teacher: observer, model, reinforce, builder, and engaged. The student's role and expected action were described as: participant and engaged.

My interview lasted approximately forty -five minutes. Afterwards, I reminded her that I would return to video tape and observe a lesson. She told me that a video camera was available to her, and if I

would provide a tape, she would have a camera ready for use.

Instruction of Student Information

I returned to observe the teacher conduct a lesson. When I presented the tape, she told me that she had later realized that the video camera would be especially distracting for this student. Of course, it was agreed to not attempt the taping. My field notes would serve as my only data-gathering source.

The lesson was filled with various opportunities for the student to read orally and write. There was little discussion of the passages' content. The lesson was dominated with recognition of words and an adherence to punctuation during the oral reading. Writing was the construction of a sentence which was built upon the use of newly introduced and reviewed key words. The sentence was constructed with significant assistance from the teacher.

The teacher sat very close to the student throughout this instruction who was frequently restless and distracted. She often turned his face to the reading passage and physically returned him to the table after one of his frequent slides. While the student read, the teacher pointed to the text when the

student failed to do so and maintained one arm around him throughout the instruction.

Teacher Training Session Information

Since this school system opted to become a training site, this teacher is responsible for training other teachers. Training consists of a year-long, three course sequence of clinical classes. Teachers receive fifteen hours of graduate credit upon successful completion of these courses. Training classes included basic strategies for diagnosing and teaching children through the program's methods. Each teacher participated in training lessons with a child while peers observed, described and analyzed behavior, and analyzed teaching decisions. These teachers are compensated monetarily for their participation in this training.

The teacher training session which I observed was conducted from 3:30 until 6:00 during my third visit. The first half of the session focused upon the implementation of literacy groups in the instructional program. The second half of this session focused upon procedures for completing the program's final evaluation. Several questions were raised from the teachers regarding how to complete required "end-of-

the-year paperwork" and procedures which must be followed in the administration of student testing.

I hoped to talk with the teachers about their experiences with this program but this did not occur. I expressed this desire to the lead teacher and she did not offer a response. I was introduced as an observer from a neighboring school system. The teachers seemed a bit aloof, perhaps uncomfortable with my presence. They did not give me an opportunity to speak with them at all. However, they were also not very responsive to the leader-teacher during this session who was well organized and presented with energy. She conducted the session with enthusiasm which never wavered.

Findings

The Assistant Superintendent, along with the teacher, stated the positive impact of this curriculum upon their students, as determined through an increase in parental involvement and support, expanded professional development for teachers, improved communication and cooperation with classroom teachers, and simulated reflection and discussion of teaching practices. Additionally, both shared, with pride, that student retentions and special education placements

declined during the 1993-1994 school year when compared to the 1994-1995 school year.

The teacher described the student as a "participant" in the learning process and an "equal partner" with the teacher. She described the role of the teacher as an "observer." When interviewed, the teacher told me that curriculum should be based upon a student's "strengths" and not on what "kids cannot do." It was clear that the teacher was espousing practical theoretical beliefs.

The data indicate that this curriculum has a technical theoretical base and takes on a positivist view of education. It offers pre-planned objectives to measure the student's progress and specific "how to" directions to guide the teacher. These specific directions control the teaching process, even dictate the length of each lesson and require the use of a timer to ensure strict adherence to time allocations. This program also specifies a time in which certain lessons should be mastered and the expected time for a student's successful completion of each level. This curriculum is focused upon what a student cannot do.

This curriculum makes the teacher the center of the instructional process by guiding and dictating the

learning tasks to and for the student. The program's individualized format does permit the student to become an active participant in the instruction, but only active if this student is directly responding to the teacher's instructional directions.

Evaluations are pre-planned with specified procedures for test administration to ensure objectivity and neutrality. Evaluation results are generated at one centralized site, and the results are then generalized and published with the program's national evaluation results.

Very often, the student is described as passive in the technical theoretical approach. My observation revealed activity on the part of the student, but although active and even outwardly engaged, his activity was very controlled and directed by the teacher. Additionally, the technical theoretical base is often described as primarily concerned with mastering of pre-set objectives and not very concerned with the overall notion of what is good for the student. The program's rationale and my interview with the teacher and the Assistant Superintendent repeatedly refer to the ''well-being'' of the child and the opportunity for the child to ''feel success'' as

driving forces for this program. Therefore, while the primary theoretical base of this curriculum program is technical, there are secondary shades of the hermeneutic view and the practical theory.

Discussion

The teacher whom I observed convinced me that she cared deeply about her profession and that she spent lots of time reflecting and thinking about the teaching-learning process. I was impressed with her knowledge and her frequent references to articles found in professional journals. Additionally, I was impressed with her knowledge of the work of several educational researchers who are focused upon the instruction of reading. She indicated that she read professional materials prolifically and that she was very intent upon remaining knowledgeable and effective. However, with all of this intelligence and care about the teaching profession and the teaching-learning process, she appeared delighted, even relieved, to be given specific directions which would answer lingering questions about how to best instruct the at-risk student.

The teacher expressed concern about student behavior and the importance of the home and its impact upon the emotionally well-being of the student. She felt that students were often negatively impacted by their home environments, resulting in students who have significantly complicated emotional problems. The time required for a teacher to respond to the behavioral and emotional needs of students has made the job of teaching more difficult and caused the teacher to become distracted from the teaching-learning process. Additionally, she was very concerned about students who entered her sixth grade classroom reading on a "second grade level." She said that she did not have the "time" nor the "expertise" to determine how best to help those students. She expressed concern that more and more, teachers' time is consumed with paperwork and the management of students' behavioral problems. I agree that unfortunately, she may not have had the time to discover and explore strategies to answer the important questions of instruction. However, I do believe she had the expertise. Yet with all of her experiences and knowledge, she was telling me that she was willing to give up her power and expertise to a program that told her what to do and how to do it.

Thus, I was led to this burning question: How could this seemingly bright and experienced teacher feel such powerlessness to provide answers to her own important questions about her students? My question caused me to reflect upon my own experiences as a teacher.

Reflections

As a classroom teacher, it never occurred to me that I should or could be involved in the process of developing curriculum. I didn't really think I would have anything to offer such a mystical and academic process. Neither my college training nor my professional experiences had allowed me to consider curriculum development within my range of capabilities, talents or even expectations. I believed that curriculum should be developed by those who knew more than I about what students should know. I realize now, that the practitioner, the classroom teacher, should know more than anyone else about what the students should know. Since the teacher is the one who knows the students, shouldn't the teacher understand what is appropriate? Shouldn't curriculum embrace the theoretical beliefs of the teacher and the talents, needs, and interests of the students and the teacher?

How can this be accomplished when curriculum is developed by someone who does not know this theory, talents, needs, and/or interests?

It is unfortunate that curriculum is often a document which is packaged and delivered to teachers for their utilization. Sometimes, as in this case, this package is developed within the school system with little involvement from the teachers, and sometimes it is bought and sold. There is often no need to convince teachers of this package's validity, nor is there often a need to include teachers in its development or purchasing decision. It is for utilization in their classrooms as the "experts" direct. Experience has convinced me, that very often, this package has very little to do with the students' or the teachers' needs and talents. It often places the teacher in a position of powerlessness.

Somehow, this powerlessness has got to be replaced with an empowered professional spirit. It is painful for me to try and imagine the powerlessness as must be felt by beginning teachers, if a teacher of such experience is willing to abdicate her beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher training must be revised and school systems must allow the time for

thoughtful reflection and an opportunity for participation in the decision making process. Only then will this powerlessness cease and our professional commitment to transform the lives of our students be fully realized.

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